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ABSTRACT

A total of 40 children in the three primary grades were studied to determine if they would donate more to a worthy cause after having been exposed to a humorous situation, in contrast to exposure to a serious one. The children who had heard a serious story about sharing donated slightly more to help Ethiopian refugees than did children who had heard humorous stories. However, the difference was not significant. Children who scored higher on Damon's scale of distributive justice donated significantly more, as did girls. It is argued that classroom discussions and activities concerning important issues could sometimes benefit from a less serious approach than is traditionally used. (Author/RH)

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THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN CHILDREN'S SHARING

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THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN CHILDREN'S SHARING

Abstract

Forty children in the three primary grades were studied to determine if they would donate more to a worthy cause after having been exposed to a humorous situation or to a serious one. The children who had just heard a serious story about sharing donated slightly more to help Ethiopian refugees than did children who has just heard humorous stories. The difference, however, was not significant. Children who scored higher on Damon's scale of distributive justice donated significantly more, as did girls. It is argued that classroom discussions and activities concerning important issues could sometimes benefit from a less serious approach than is traditionally used.

THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN CHILDREN'S SHARING

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between humor and moral behavior, in particular sharing. A developmental relationship between moral reasoning and appreciation of humor in young children has been established by McGhee (1974). In a series of three studies he compared heteronomous and autonomous levels of moral understanding with humor appreciation. In Piagetian theory, heteronomous children are those who behave and reason in a morally acceptable way because they are responding to the demands of authority figures; conversely, they will misbehave if no one is watching. The ages of heteronomy correspond to the preoperational years. Children and adults who behave and reason morally in an autonomous way are those who have internalized some measure of moral responsibility and will generally continue to act according to their understanding even when left unobserved. Autonomous moral reasoning begins to appear at the same time as the concrete operational period.

A primary difference between the heteronomous and autonomous child is that the former believes a misdeed should be judged by the amount of damage done, whereas the latter has learned to take intent into account. In relating this difference to humor, McGhee presented children with cartoon stories in which intentionality and damaging outcomes were at issue. It was found that heteronomous children thought stories with highly damaging outcomes funnier than stories with less damaging outcomes. For autonomous children, high damage was funny only when it occurred unintentionally, and, in general, accidental damaging outcomes were funnier than intentional ones. McGhee concluded that, "While increased naughtiness or moral unacceptability of an outcome or event adds to its funniness for heteronomous children, it

detracts from humor appreciaton in adults and morally more mature autonomous children" (p. 514).

In the studies just described, the researcher observed children's thoughts: moral reasoning, humor appreciation. Combining the two elements of morality and humor in a study of behavior has been done in a university psychology class (Wilson, 1981). Wilson's study will be described, because it was the intent of the present study to replicate it in a way developmentally appropriate for young children.

The question raised by the university study was: Will a person be more generous when in a serious frame of mind or in a humorous one? To answer this question, two audiotapes were used, one serious and one humorous. The tapes were randomly assigned to male members of a psychology class who believed they were being tested for another purpose. Once a student had listened to the tape he was dismissed, and then approached in the hallway by another classmate (actually a confederate). This confederate mentioned to the subject that he had forgotten his lunch money and asked if he could borrow some. The amount was left to the subject, who then learned the real intent of the study and received his money back.

It was found that humor subjects contributed significantly more lunch money than did the serious subjects. The humor subjects also displayed a more positive affective state in a questionnaire that was given between listening to the tape and being approached in the hallway.

Implications for young children. Although McGhee's study demonstrated a relationship between young children's humor and moral understanding, a literature search revealed no empirical studies combining children's humor and moral behavior. The relationship of the latter two has implications

both for research and classroom activities. Interviews of children's moral reasoning invariably present situations which are very serious dilemmas (e.g. Damon, 1979; Selman, 1979; Piaget, 1965; Kohlberg, 1976). Further, when issues of a moral nature are introduced into classrooms, the emphasis has traditionally been on serious discussion or activites (e.g., Hersh et al, 1979; Shaftel and Shaftel, 1982; Schuncke and Krogh, 1983).

One important aspect of both moral reasoning and behavior is distributive justice or sharing. It is a featured quality in virtually all moral development research and teaching models. Thus, it is important to ask: If university students are more generous in a humorous frame of mind, could the same be true for younger children? Related questions would include: If we present humorous dilemmas to children in our research interviews, will their scores differ? If we use humorous discussions and activities in our classrooms, will children be more inclined toward generosity and fairness in sharing?

In order to take a first step in attempting to answer these questions, the present study was designed with the intent of replicating the university research in its focus on seriousness, humor and generosity in a laboratory setting. At the same time alterations were made to make the activities appropriate for primary grade children.

Alterations in the design. Methods and materials will be treated in the following section, but a brief discussion is included at this point to describe the alterations made between the university study and this one. In the university research no attempt was made to determine the moral reasoning level of the subjects. However, the relationship between generosity and level of moral development has been an issue in research done with young children

(e.g. Krebs and Sturrup, 1981; Damon, 1977; Rubin and Schneider, 1973) and was thus determined to be important for this study. The instrument chosen was Damon's (1977b) interview for positive justice, or judgment of fairness in distribution of available goods. This instrument probes the reasoning of children between the ages of three and ten. Damon has found that answers to interview questions can be fit into a framework of six levels (0-A, 0-B, 1-A, 1-B, 2-A, 2-B). Three of these would most commonly be observed in primary grade children:

Level 1-A. Child shares, or doesn't, based on notions of strict equality. Everyone gets the same no matter what issues are introduced.

Level 1-B. Child shares, or doesn't, based on notions of reciprocity, merit, deserving. Those who have contributed effort of some sort deserve some of the goods.

Level 2-A. Understanding of deservingness becomes more complex with the realization that merit may be based on more than effort (poverty, for example).

A second alteration in the design concerned the tape-recorded stories. The university students were left alone to play their tapes and answer their questionnaires. This, of course, would not be practical for young children so that in this research stories were read, by the interviewers, to the children individually. It was decided, moreover, that children should be aware that the theme was sharing so the stories chosen were on that subject.

A third change concerned the opportunity to donate money. Primary children could not be expected to be carrying loose change, of course, so money had to be provided. Thus, the interviewer gave each child several nickels.

While it was realistic for university students to share lunch money with each other, an adult interviewer couldn't expect a small child to do the same. A donation to Ethiopian children was suggested by the school principal. During the previous two weeks the entire school had devoted much energy to raising money for this cause. The primary children were aware that the fund drive had been instigated and was run by a second grade boy.

To summarize, in each study students were presented with either a humorous or a serious story, then asked to donate any amount desired to a worthy cause. In the university study, subjects heard a tape-recorded story, filled out a questionnaire that revealed their affective mood, then were presented the opportunity to provide lunch money for a fellow student who had "forgotten" his. In the primary grade study, subjects were given a test of positive justice reasoning, then heard a story read by the interviewer, and finally were presented with the opportunity of donating money to Ethiopian children.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 40 children in the first, second and third grades, with 15 boys and 25 girls. The school was a university laboratory school in which children are selected for admission in such a way that the community's racial and economic structures are reflected in the make-up of the student body. Thus, the children in this study were both white (85%) and black (15%), and from a variety of economic backgrounds.

Materials

As discussed earlier, Damon's scale of positive justice was used to probe each child's level of understanding. The interview story used in this study was specifically related to sharing money with children of various needs and interests.

Each child was randomly assigned to the serious or the humorous interview and story. Children assigned to the serious group heard the story, The Pet Shop by Ezra Jack Keats (1972). The story chosen for children in the humorous group was actually a combination. The first portion was a story similar to one used in McGhee's (1974) research. The second part was a short selection of cartoon stories from a Peanuts collection, Stop Snowing on My Secretary (Schulz, 1977). All of the selections were chosen because the humor in them could be appreciated by children no matter whether they were heteronomous or autonomous in their moral reasoning, or preoperational or concrete operational in their intellectual thinking. The serious story and the collection of humor items took approximately the same amount of time to read.

Each pupil was offered eight nickels as thanks for participating in the study. There was a cardboard box with a slit in the top for collecting money to send to Ethiopian children. Children could donate to this fund from the nickels they received.

Procedure

In each classroom children were randomly assigned to the serious or humorous treatment. One of two graduate students who had been trained in both treatments called each child individually to an adjacent room.

The interviewer announced that, "Today we're going to do some talking about sharing." The Damon interview was administered first with an audio-tape recorder turned on. This interview was followed by either the serious or the humorous stories.

After the story, the child was thanked for listening and for sharing his/her views on sharing. The eight nickels were then given as "a little thank-you present." The interviewer then added a "post-script" to the session by telling the child that there was another sharing project going on and it was to collect money for starving children in Ethiopia. The child was invited to contribute some money to the fund and told, "If you want to you can put some of your money in the box and I'll send it along with mine. Of course, you don't have to either; it's only if you want."

During the first interviews given in this study, the interviewers turned the tape back on at this point and asked children for the reason they had given the number of nickels chosen. It soon became apparent that this line of questioning intimidated the children and they thought there was a hidden agenda. Most immediately tried to donate all their nickels. The question was then dropped and subsequent analysis was concerned only with the number of nickels donated. Each child was returned to the classroom immediately after making the donation and receiving another mention of thanks.

Results

The Damon interview was scored by the researcher and one graduate student. Interrater reliability was 90%. For purposes of this data analysis, the qualitative levels of positive justice reasoning were transformed into quanitative scores. Level 0-A reasoning recieved 0 points,

Level 0-B, 100 points and so on. To be scored at a 'pure' level, a subject's reasoning was required to be at least 76 percent at that level. Major levels (50-75 percent) and minor levels (24-49 percent) were also possible. Thus, a subject reasoning predominantly at Damon's Level 1-A, with some reasoning evident at 1-B would receive a score of 233. In keeping with the results of other studies, the amount contributed by each child was significantly related to the level of positive justice reasonings ($p < .05$).

There was no significant difference found in the amount contributed across ages, or between races. However, between sexes, the difference in contributions was significant, with boys contributing an average of 30% and the girls contributing an average of 51.2% of their nickels.

The major question, of course, concerned the contributions given by children who were exposed to the humorous or serious interviews. A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences between the two groups, although the children in the serious group gave a higher percentage of their money (52% vs 34.5%).

Table I here

Discussion

Traditionally, classroom activities and discussions have been designed as serious undertakings no matter what grade level. The purpose of this study was to determine if this is the preferable approach for young children or if the use of humor would actually induce greater generosity. The lack of significance between the two approaches, with serious subjects contributing somewhat more, indicates that humor, while not the preferred approach

is certainly a viable one. On a practical level this may indicate that, while serious discussions and activities are still in order, teachers need not be concerned when the atmosphere occasionally strays to the lighthearted. This approach is in opposition to the current literature which advises teachers that good classroom management requires keeping children focused on the serious business at hand.

Only two tests showed significance in this study. The first, which analyzed contributions between positive justice reasoning levels, has characteristically shown differences so that the results were not unexpected. The second, testing the differing contributions of boys and girls, is more problematic. A review of the literature shows no consistency in the generosity of males and females (e.g., Krogh, 1979; Rubin and Schneider, 1973; Damon, 1977). Further research needs to be done in this area.

Table I

Percentage of nickels contributed

Source	df	SS	MS	F	PR F
Age	3	3340	1113.3	1.07	NS
Damon Level	2	6719	3359.5	3.66	.035
Race	1	717	717	.68	NS
Sex	1	4213	4213	4.39	.045
Treatment	1	3062	3062	3.09	NS

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